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CHILDREN IN THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY

By JOHN GOLDEN,

President, United Textile Workers of America.

It is particularly gratifying to the trades unionist to see the present great interest in the child labor question in comparison with that of only a few years ago: an interest seen in thousands of earnest men and women in practically all walks of life. No better proof is needed than this splendid gathering to-day; a gathering of men and women whose only thought is the welfare of the child; whose only hope is the total elimination of child labor. That many thousands of children, many of them of very tender age, are working in the textile industry cannot be questioned; that this evil is not confined to any one state, or any particular part of the country, can be easily proven; consequently there are in my opinion only two issues that really confront us—namely, to find out exactly to what extent children are employed, to be in a position to realize the task before us, then try to find an effective remedy for the evil. A federal investigation is now under way, and, if carried to the very foundation, which I have every reason to believe it will be, I venture to predict it will show more startling figures than the census of 1900, when the public first awoke to the fact that what the labor unions had been fighting against, both as regards women wage-workers and child laborers, was in reality a national evil, becoming more alarming every year.

Child labor is employed simply because it is cheap and unresisting. There is never any danger of the child workers organizing, either among themselves or as a trade union, for the purpose of securing better conditions or higher wages. There are many occupations in a textile factory wherein it is cheaper to have two children working for three dollars or less per week than to employ one full-grown man or woman at a decent wage.

Child workers have been in the textile industry ever since machinery was introduced in the mills. They have grown in number as the industry expanded, and it is bound to be a tremendous task to eliminate them from it. The distinguished specialist in hook-

worm diseases will tell you that he has investigated the cotton mill and the unsanitary farm, and that between the two, providing he had to make a choice, he would prefer to put his ten-year-old daughter in the mill. I am inclined to believe that if this same distinguished scientist were forced to make such a choice through poverty caused by the fact that, as a wage-worker he was not earning sufficient to keep body and soul together, he would be at my side on this platform advocating the abolition of child labor, and working shoulder to shoulder with me on the labor platform in an effort to secure a higher wage standard for him who ought to be the breadwinner of the family.

In the South

About six years ago I visited Macon, Ga., among other places in the South. A man who held a position in one of the mills took me around to talk with some of the people in their homes. I have a vivid recollection of one widow who, with tears coursing down her pale cheeks, related the story of how they had been induced to leave their little farm, and her husband to take a position in the mill. "Yes," she murmured, "we were poor in a way, but we had enough to eat and wear; we had the fresh air and the sunshine. Our three little ones were healthy and robust. My husband had not been long in the card room of the cotton mill before he began to weaken and fail. Five years from the time he left his farm he was laid in a consumptive's grave." Just then two young girls entered the home. The mother said one was thirteen and the other eleven; that the elder went to work soon after they arrived in Macon; the younger girl had been working about two years. This girl corrected this latter statement by saying: "No, ma, it is two years and two months since I commenced to work." Neither girl appeared very strong, the elder especially. I could not help but think that all might have been better off had they remained on the farm, and that the father's lungs might have lasted longer up there than in the dust-ridden atmosphere of the carding room of a cotton mill, working for a wage that prevented his getting that sustenance which might have prolonged his life, and forced him to send his children to work that their meagre earnings might help them to live. How often has this same drama been enacted in the textile worker's home both North and South!

Wages in Maine

Three years ago I visited a mill city in Maine, where a dispute, started in one of the departments of the mill, had spread until all the operatives came out on strike. When I arrived a meeting was being held in one of the halls. Eighty per cent of those present were French Canadians, composed of men, women and children of almost all ages. They commenced to show me their envelopes just received from the mill. The older people's envelopes read something like this: "John Smith, \$5.40, forfeited \$5.40, balance, nil." I discovered that a rule was in force at the mill whereby every employee, man, woman or child, had to sign an agreement before they could secure employment, agreeing to forfeit a week's wages if they absented themselves from work without permission, or, as the supposed contract read, without a reasonable excuse.

The women then commenced to show me their children's pay envelopes. I found that even the child workers had not been spared. I asked the parents the ages of the children whose pay had been forfeited, and took notes. Of nineteen children, fourteen were under twelve; three under eleven; two under ten years of age. This occurred in a New England state. I have not singled out Maine for any special reason. The same condition can be duplicated to-day in many New England towns and cities where textile factories exist. We have laws which prohibit all this, and we have some very stringent laws so far as they read; but the trouble is they are not enforced. Imagine one factory inspector for the whole State of Maine responsible to no one but the governor of the state. Even the labor commissioner has no control over the office whatever. In fact, from what was reported to me a few months ago, from a very reliable source, the labor commissioner and the factory inspector are scarcely on speaking terms. I ask any of you to go out among the textile workers, either the organized or the unorganized, of any New England state, ask them to what extent they are protected by factory inspection, ask them how rigidly the labor laws on the statute books—placed there after years of struggle of the labor unions—are enforced, and I will warrant that ninety-five per cent. will tell you that factory inspectors are a joke, and that factory inspection is a farce.

During the past two weeks a protest has gone forth from several well organized cities, both in Massachusetts and Rhode Island,

relative to the cribbing of time by many corporations, who, because a fifty-six-hour law had gone into effect in these two states on the first of January, were endeavoring to run as close to the old schedule as possible, in spite of the fact that in many instances the day help had been compelled to accept a reduction in their already meager wages equivalent to two hour's work.

Federal Children's Bureau

I am firmly of the opinion that the evil of child labor is so far-reaching that it is the duty of the federal government to take hold of the problem; that a children's bureau is an actual necessity. I am convinced after many years of experience and rubbing shoulders with this evil in all its intensity, that no matter what laws you enact many of the states cannot enforce them; others will not try.

Cause of Child Labor

There is more in this great child labor question than appears on the surface. In digging down to discover the effects upon the child worker we must also dig deeply to find the causes for its existence. There are thousands of fathers in every part of this land where textile mills exist who to-day are watching the color fade from the cheeks of their girls standing at the loom or the spinning frame ten long hours a day. There are thousands of weary mothers, working side by side with their husbands, who have left little ones at home, some still with the child unborn. Why are they there? Is it because they wish to have those little ones unguarded and unprotected? After you have asked yourself these questions reflect for a moment on the increased cost of living, then consider the fact that according to federal statistics the average wage of a textile worker is a few cents over six dollars per week. There I believe you will find the answer. Let us devise some means whereby the adult textile worker, especially the supporter of a home, will receive a wage equal to our American ideals. You will find few parents, whether rich or poor, who are not imbued with the same keen desire to see their boy make good, to see their girl grow up into beautiful womanhood. The utilitarian phase of this great question has been lost sight of to a great extent when dealing with child labor.

I hope to see the day when no child under sixteen years of age

will be forced to leave school. I long for the day when men will be the breadwinners of the family; when in great industries like the textile industry no one man who neither toils nor spins will reap millions out of it by pernicious gambling; when no stockholders will stretch forth their hands for dividends out of all proportion to the capital invested, while thousands of others are living on a miserable average wage of a dollar a day. The trade unions, assailed and maligned as they are, have this ideal in mind. We have for years been trying to reach this goal. We shall continue until the fight is won. I now seem to see a silver lining in the industrial horizon. Whether we are capitalists or laborers, whether labor unionists or anti-labor unionists, as Christian men and women we know that child labor has no right to exist; that wherever the fault lies or whoever is responsible, the child at least is innocent. If there is any industry, be it ever so great, that cannot survive without exploiting the child let it go from our midst; we are better without it. The money gained from such a source is worse than blood money, and cannot bring either happiness or contentment to any one. I cannot help but feel that with the forces now at work on this great question a solution must be near.

Your National Child Labor Committee has done noble work in the past; your possibilities for the future are still greater. Not until the last child is taken from the mill, the mine and the workshop and placed in the school and the playground, will your work be accomplished. You have had many obstacles to overcome; you will have others to contend with. Your most ardent workers will be gibed with the term "faddist", "alarmist", "yellow journalist", etc., just as the trade unionist has been assailed as "agitator", "disturber", and "grafter", but in spite of all this the crusade against this evil, which, if left alone, will sap the very life's blood from our republic, must go on and on. It is from such gatherings as these, of men and women in all walks of life ready to join hands in one great movement, that the child may remain a child as God intended, that men and women shall do the world's work; it is from such sources the education and the solution will finally come. The public conscience is aroused as never before to the necessity of abolishing this grave evil. The mental and physical development of the child means a more intelligent, a more moral, and a better generation of men and women.